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[How] Can there be non-compliance in UK HE librarianship? Or, in defence of “‘68, or something”: A reflection on the critical perspectives conference

“What do you mean, “non-compliant?” If I was non-compliant, I’d lose my job”

In the Q and A following my paper at the “Towards a critical (art) librarianship” conference, I was happy to be asked this question regarding non-compliance by keynote speaker Emily Drabinski. It probably isn’t a verbatim quote, and I wouldn’t be able to give my response verbatim either (thanks, in part, to feeling that magical nearly-done-my-paper adrenaline-high at the time). However, this was the sentiment, and it has tumbled around in my mind ever since as a potentially fertile entry point into thinking about critical/radical/non-compliant possibilities within Higher Education in general, and librarianship specifically.

Emily’s question was neither intended nor received as “criticism”¹ and this response shouldn’t be read as such either. It did hint to me, however, and however supportively, at a sense that the idea of non-compliance in the tight capitalist bureaucracy of the performative university was either impossible (on account of jobs being lost) on an everyday individual level, or was a bit of a naïve, even nostalgic sentiment to throw into the debate. Lauren Berlant asks these questions after being accused of being “‘68 or something”:

“What nuclear button does the word *utopian* push? Why does pressure on the politics of professionalism elicit such rage and contempt? How is it that a narrative of failure has come to frame that “revolution” with a black edge, an edge that has become a bar to reimagining a radical relation of politics and professional life?” (Berlant, 1994, p. 125)

Though these words are stronger than that which was intended on day following my paper, it reminded me of this accusation of “not living in the real world” when using words like radical, revolution, liberation in a professional – or, even a political – environment. As such, I will base this short reflection around the question and I want to explore meanings of compliance, of radical, and of everyday practice, and to argue in favour of the kind of expansive, ‘ordinary’, even utopian notions of resistance through non-compliance.

Before getting into that, I will give a short summary of the paper I presented for context. At the conference, I delivered a paper called “Radical librarianship in the UK HE sector” which had three strands. Firstly, I sought to frame radical librarianship within a context I feel to have been framed around the two perceived crises of HE – one being the crisis of the marketisation of HE, and the encroachment of market methods and logics into the field of Higher Education, and the second being a “crisis of knowledge” which has more to do with destabilising truth claims and biases within long accepted canons of academic knowledge. I concluded this first section by stating that “a radical response to the current context needs to be cognisant of both strands of crisis – the material structures of HE, their knowledge infrastructures and the affective atmospheres and relationships they give rise to”.

The second part of my paper looked at one way of thinking about the possibilities of radical librarianship through the organisation of Radical Librarians Collective, a loose network of library workers and supporters based in the UK. This approach was focused on a viewpoint of ‘radical’ action by library workers ‘enabling’ radical educational experiences in their workplace.

¹Huge thanks to Emily for engaging with me on this, both at the time and subsequently. Emily replied that she ‘appreciated a robust discussion around these issues’ when I asked whether she minded being quoted in this piece

Finally, I opened up a different perspective on radical librarianship through the methodology of ethnography, drawing on my PhD research into the Hive joint-use library in Worcester, UK. Here, I am centrally interested in the capacity of ethnography as a methodology to illuminate notions of educational becoming, difference, and convergence within everyday experiences in a library. Radical possibility, this time, is sought in the spaces between the shelves, and in illuminating subtler (or even more mundane) expressions of non-compliant education than the formal project of radical librarianship found in RLC.

It was in this section that I spoke about non-compliance, the topic of this reflection. The question by Emily, with the rejoinder “if I was non-compliant, I’d lose my job”, is indicative of the hard-edge imagery conjured by the term. Non-compliance understood as a refusal of work - or even sabotage of work? Non-compliance as incompatible with the market-riven structures so many have lamented (and I did in the first section of my paper). Certainly, complying suggests acting in accordance with a wish or command, so actively rejecting the concrete commands of library work we dislike might well not go down well. While seemingly resurging in popularity there remains significant prejudice and challenge facing worker organisation through unions, not to mention decades of diminishing clout (Mills and McCullough, 2018).

However, in contrast to this hard edge, I’d like to think about non-compliance in soft ways, and in so doing think about the relationship between individual and collective action, disposition and power. A guiding light here has been the work of Marxian geographers, JK Gibson-Graham. Their ground clearing work identifying global examples of non-capitalist practice places emphasis on an envisioning of the present that identifies and draws out moments of rupture with the totalising world view of capitalism. These moments may not “remake our societies overnight in some total and millennial fashion” but could “participate in constituting and reconstituting them on a daily basis” (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p254). In this sense, non-compliance is less about hard acts of defiance, and more about a personal reconstitution of everyday actions – a rejection (failure to comply) not only of some of the expectations that come with marketized HE, but also a rejection of the totalising “capitocentric” (Gibson-Graham, 2014, p148) or “neoliberal” linguistic structuring of the field of HE in itself. It involves finding chinks of possibility within straitened circumstances to put in action a radical politics of possibility whether through friction or through joy.

What would such a personal non-compliance look like in practice in library environments? It might not look like a huge amount, but that’s really the point. In addition to the vital work of organisation and resistance, I’m arguing for something much more ordinary: a continuing belief in the possibility of revolution. At root, I think what I’m saying is that we should continue to look closely at what is possible within the circumstances we’re in and remember that small scale actions and attitudes matter not only to those we engage with, but also to our conception of ourselves and our work. As Geertz said, “small facts speak to large issues, winks to epistemology, or sheep raids to revolution, because they are made to” (1973, p23). Refusing to accept the logics of marketisation in HE can help us approach the day more positively and engage freshly with the reason we chose to work in libraries. Beyond the acts themselves, their impact on us as practitioners is not negligible: Gramsci’s “critical understanding of self” shows how action and intention work in positive feedback – the way we view the world effects how we act in it.

My research into radical librarians in England (Quinn and Bates, 2017) found that very ordinary actions like keeping a reflective journal, connecting library work with broader political questions and projects (if feasible), and seeking out satisfying projects (if feasible) whenever possible had a cumulative and uplifting effect on those committed to them. Engaging in critical conversations with colleagues and students and remarking on what mattered to them about their jobs were important

to those I interviewed for sustaining and building radical hopes for the future. It might mean talking to students about predatory publishers and illegal pdfs, or it might mean enjoying a conversation about entirely unrelated moments of their day. That's not non-compliant in the sense of doing something illegal, but it's increasingly non-compliant in the sense of refusing to simply deliver a service as provider to a customer and rather engaging with them as critical human beings capable of making their own ethical choices.

Additionally, seeking out possibilities for creating projects within existing structures – such as a critical reading circle that goes under the banner of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opens opportunities for gently resisting the professionalising edge of the status quo. The example of University of the Arts London and the putting on of this conference - a conference critically engaging in the all-to-often accepted structures of library work is a softly non-compliant act. In addition to learning and engaging with peers about their exciting projects, it also contributed to a boosting of morale for those attending and returning to their workplaces to engage with their colleagues there.

Much of what I've discussed can obviously be criticised as being banal, utopian, naïve, ineffective. Isn't asking for a kind of optimistic small-scale attitudinal shift pure individualism, akin to the neoliberal performative subject itself? Does it not put an unfair burden on those already under pressure to meet that burden with some idea of "joy"? These responses are certainly fair enough, and I don't mean to argue that envisioning radical possibility in neoliberalised HE through everyday actions and personal reconstitution is "enough." Of course, structural oppressions and imbalances require collective responses, and there's an equal imperative to focus there.

However, and in conclusion, thinking expansively about non-compliance and being open to the idea of continually re-opening the door to optimism, utopianism, revolution, is potentially fruitful for three reasons: it can make for better library work as we reengage with the library as it is, it can make for more satisfied library workers as we find opportunities for joy and friction in our everyday practices, and, finally, in diffusing the enormous sounding task of "radical" into these everyday practices, it can contribute to a cumulative effect which aids and enables larger scale collective projects.

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